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The Conspirator

Burgess Was Liability During Time In USA

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Excerpted from the book "The Philby Conspiracy." Copyright 1968 by Times Newspaper Ltd. Published by Doubleday & Co., Inc.

'Crack-Up'

In August 1950, Guy Burgess was posted to Washington with the rank of first secretary. By any standards it was a most curious appointment. It would be hard to think of anyone less well-suited for such a job at such a period — the Korean War had begun in June 1950.

Before he left for Washington, Burgess received some advice about how he should conduct himself. Burgess had pointed out that, given the political situation, he felt certain misapprehensions about his future job, particularly as his area was to be the Far East, and his role to explain Britain's policy there to the State Department.

He was advised to soft-pedal his Socialist views; it turned out that there had been an incident involving another politically committed young man on the Washington strength, who had been overheard by an FBI informer talking like a Red at a private cocktail party.

The week before Burgess left he gave a large party in the Bond Street flat which, by Burgess' standards at least, was restrained and respectable. A friend, leaving, delivered a valedictory admonition: "For

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God's sake, Guy," he said, "remember three things when you get to the States. Don't be too aggressively left-wing. Don't get involved in race relations; and, above all, make sure there aren't any homosexual incidents which might cause trouble."

A FRIEND who was collecting his hat and umbrella in the hall was privileged to hear Burgess' response to this excellent counsel. "I understand," said Guy, looking at his most mischievous. "What you mean is I mustn't make a pass at Paul Robeson." It was an inauspicious prelude to a spell in Washington which was to be little short of disastrous.

Within weeks of his arrival Burgess had clashed with his superior, Sir Hubert Graves, who was counselor at the Embassy; Graves had him removed from the Far Eastern Department. Burgess was inflamed by what he regarded as the dictatorial approach of the State Department and the failure of the British Embassy to project their own government's policy with either confidence or conviction. He was particularly irritated by the role of General MacArthur, the friend of Chiang Kai-shek. Guy habitually referred to Chiang as "The mad satrap." It was clear that Burgess' days in Washington were numbered.

The Washington period would not have been of any particular importance had it not been for the fact that when Burgess arrived Philby offered to put him up at his home, a comfortable diplomatic residence on tree-lined Nebraska Avenue.

Philby told his Embassy colleagues that Burgess had been having a hard time in London and that he intended to straighten him out. Philby's decision, apparently a quixotic gesture, turned out to be fatal for his long-preserved cover. But he has since told people in Moscow that his Soviet superiors approved his plan to help Guy.

As a house guest, Burgess had certain disadvantages; he drank enormously, came home at all hours, and left empty bottles about the house. The Philby children, Josephine, John, and Tommy remember "Uncle Guy" as a generous but slightly alarming figure smelling strongly of alcohol and tobacco. His thick fingers with heavily bitten nails were yellow with nicotine and constantly employed in making repairs to John Philby's "O" gauge electric train set which occupied a place of honor, covering most of Burgess' room in the basement. Burgess, who was always bringing presents home for the children, including a large wigwag, was fascinated by the trains and spent hours playing with them. He had time on his hands because it was soon clear that the embassy regarded him as unsuitable for any responsible job.

APART FROM HIS political opinions, he was too drunk. Squadron-Leader "Tommy" Thompson, the embassy security officer, reckoned that Burgess was at the office in an alcoholic stupor several days each week.

In February, 1951, Burgess was stopped three times in one day for speeding by Virginia state policemen. His only comment

afterwards was irritation that they had charged him with traveling at 80 mph: "I was doing at least a hundred," he said. More important from the point of view of embassy security was the fact that he was accompanied by a U.S. citizen with a record for homosexual offenses. The FBI report on the matter, a copy of which reached the ambassador, pointed this out and Sir Oliver Franks decided the time had come to get rid of his recalcitrant junior.

It was not as if Burgess were even usefully employed. In order to keep him quietly out of the way he had been given the undesirable job of sorting the letters, thousands of them, which listeners to a radio network had sent after a commentator had appealed to all those who thought Britain was dragging her heels over Korea to write to the British Embassy saying so. For weeks Burgess sat in the library studying this voluminous correspondence and replying to the less-lunatic contributions. It was not a task calculated to endear the great American public to Guy Burgess.

It was only a matter of time before Burgess was suspended but there was one more crucial incident before he left. Philby had insisted Burgess should get an apartment of his own but in February 1951 he spent a weekend with the Philbys. Aileen was busy with the new baby, Harry, and after lunch on Sunday, Philby and Burgess went for a walk in the garden.

According to the story Philby told afterwards he then took Burgess into his confidence and gave him certain information that had come to him in his capacity as liaison man between the SIS and the CIA. This was that an MI 5 investigation of a security leakage first discovered in 1949 had eliminated seven hundred Foreign Office employees and isolated four suspects. Of these Donald Maclean was regarded as the most likely.

Philby was to claim publicly that he gave Burgess this information in all innocence, simply because he knew Burgess had been a friend of Maclean's at Cambridge. It was a thin story at the time but, as events proved, perfectly serviceable given the protective reflexes of SIS and their gentlemanly lack of scepticism. In Beirut, just before he defected, Philby stuck to approximately the same story, confirming that he had warned Burgess but admitting this time his intention was to get a message to Maclean. It is still a strange story.

WHY WAS PHILBY, who could hardly have had any mock-modest doubts about his own importance as an agent, prepared to risk his cover for the sake of another agent whose best work was done? In the face of it, such a step is opposed to every canon of espionage. But had Burgess not fled at the same time as Maclean, Philby would not have been suspected. It is therefore highly possible that some other factor entered the situation after Philby had taken the first step.